

Housing pattern and food habit of the *Mro*-tribe community in Bangladesh: A forest dependence perspective

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Abstract: An exploratory study was conducted on the housing pattern and food habit of the *Mro* tribe in Bandarban region, Bangladesh, highlighting their indigenous knowledge. The study was carried out with respect to three income groups. A total of 36 households (12 from each income groups) were assessed using different participatory appraisals through semi-structured questionnaires. A special type of indigenous knowledge on housing pattern and food habit was explored in the *Mro* community, which correspond to the severe dependence on forest resources.

Keywords: Housing pattern; Special and Favorite food; Cooking and drinking procedure; *Mro*; Bangladesh

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Introduction

The socio-economic and cultural life of the tribals and forest dwellers is closely associated with forest to a great extent (Shroff 1997). The forest has been playing a vital role in the economy of the tribals in Bangladesh. The religious, cultural and economic activities of them depend on forests. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) comprises of three hill districts, Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban, having a present population of 1.1 million (Khisa 1998). The region constitutes 10% of the total land area of Bangladesh (Haque 2000a) and 76% of the total hilly region of the country (Khisa 1998). The CHTs are inhabited by a variety of tribes (Banik 1998) at least 12 are recorded (Karim 1994; BBS 1997). These tribal communities of the CHTs for centuries have been living on slash-and-burn agriculture (*Jhum* cultivation), fishing, hunting and harvesting of forest products (Mustafa *et al.* 2002).

The *Murung* or *Mro* are the ancient among the ethnic minorities of the CHTs region (Roy 1996) who represent different types of socio-cultural organizations compared to the *Chakma* and *Marma* (Ahmed 2002), the two major tribal groups in Bangladesh. The *Mro*, as an organized kin group live in hamlets, a small settlement comprising five to twenty households which is considered to be the primary socio-economic unit of *Mro* life (Brauns and Löffler 1990).

The *Mro* live in the hilltops in a pristine environment, inside the high ranges of hills and dense forest almost totally beyond the eyesight's of the outer civilized world. They also have developed indigenous knowledge system of their own in practicing the special type of utilization pattern of forest produces (Mohiuddin *et al.* 2002). But most of the wealth of

indigenous knowledge of the tribal people in CHTs is being threatened by the settlements of the non-tribal people in the region. The lifestyle and ethno-forestry perception along with the indigenous knowledge governing the daily activities of the ethnic communities need to be explored highly, in order to conserve them as well as to assess the possibilities to conserve the forest resources by utilizing such traditional indigenous concepts. It was hypothesized that the *Mro* community encompassed a particular type of housing pattern and food habit including indigenous knowledge. Siddiqi (1998), Khisa (1998), Sattar (1998), Banik (1998), Alam and Khisa (2000), Haque (2000a, 2000b), Mustafa *et al.* (2002), Alam (2002), Mohiuddin *et al.* (2002) carried out several studies on various tribes regarding the exploration of ethno-forestry. However, due to the isolation and the inaccessibility of the *Mro* community, no study was carried out previously on their housing pattern and food habit. So this study was undertaken to ascertain those in Bandarban region, Bangladesh.

Materials and methods

Study area

The study was conducted at Bolipara Union of Thanchi Upazilla (Sub-district) of Bandarban district, Bangladesh over a period of five months from June 2002 to October 2002. The study site is indicated in the Fig. 1.

Thanchi Upazilla occupies an area of 1020.82 km² including forest area of 680.55 km². It lies between 21°15' and 21°57' north latitude and between 92°20' and 92°41' east longitudes (BBS 1992). Thanchi, some 55 km south-east of Bandarban district headquarter is the remotest and perhaps, one of the most inaccessible Upazillas of Bangladesh (Haque 2000b), of which 90% of the area is hilly, 4% covers rivers and marshes and the rest 6% is only suitable for intensive agriculture (Khisa 1998). The Upazilla consists of 4 Unions, 12 Mauzas and 82 Villages. In the Upazilla, there are 2885 households in which the number of tribal

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households is 2661. It has been observed that 98.00% of the main houses of the dwelling households are made of straw/bamboo, 0.18% of them are made of cement and 1.82% of them are made of a combination of different types

of materials (BBS 1992). The Upazilla has a total population of 18,000, of which *Mro* constitutes a total of 3,738, whereas it is 22,178 in the whole CHTs (BBS 2002).



Fig. 1 A map of Bangladesh indicating the study site

Methods

Out of seven Upazillas of Bandarban district, the *Mro* are concentrated in the hilly areas of Thanchi, Alikadam, Lama, Ruma and Naikhyangchari Upazilla (Drong, 2001). A list of these five Upazillas was arranged alphabetically and Thanchi was selected randomly for the list. Mostly the *Mro* inhabited Bolipara Union of Thanchi Upazilla. So this union was selected purposively. A list of the *Mro* hamlets was collected from the office of 'Caritas Bangladesh', an NGO working locally for the improvement of the *Mro* tribe. Three hamlets were finally selected at random from the list. A preliminary socio-economic survey was carried out to

ascertain important socio-economic parameters of the study area to select respondents for detailed study. The hamlets were surveyed completely at that stage. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for the survey, worked out in advance and pre-tested for intelligibility. Household heads were the respondents of the study and they took help from other members of the family when viewed necessary.

After preliminary socio-economic survey, the households were categorized into three income groups;

- (1) Poor, having a total annual income of <Tk. 10000.00

(2) Medium, having a total annual income range of Tk. 10000.00- Tk. 15000.00

(3) Rich, having a total annual income >Tk. 15000.00

From each of the three hamlets, 12 households were selected by taking 4 from each farm category randomly. Thus, a total of 36 households were selected from the study area.

Results and discussion

Housing pattern

The survey revealed that houses (*Kim*) of the *Mro* tribe were generally situated on the exposed slopes of the hill. These were much larger and built on nine to twelve feet high *Machangs* (bamboo made platforms). All of the houses in the study area were made of wood, bamboo and sungrass (Fig. 2). A wooden staircase (a tree trunk with notched steps) was used in front of the door to climb up into the house.

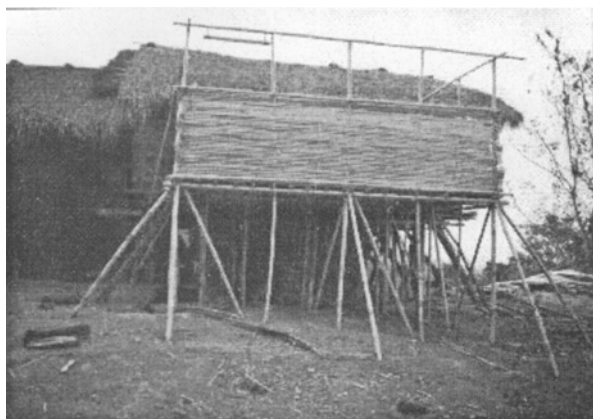


Fig. 2 The *Kim*, a typical *Mro* house in Bandarban region, Bangladesh

The housing pattern of the *Mro* tribe consisted of three basic parts. First, there was a large room, the *Kim-tam*, with an outside entrance. That room was a kind of living room in which people cook and eat, receive visitors, and accommodate guests. Children and the unmarried members of the family also sleep in the *Kim-tam*. Secondly, there was a narrower and somewhat lower room, the *Kimma*, with a separate roof. Though being situated in front of the *Kim-tam*, that room was accessible only from the *Kim-tam*. At night the *Kimma* serves as a bedroom for the married couple and their smaller children, in the front most part of which there was a fireplace where children were born. Finally, there was an open platform, *Saar*, which was built onto the right or left side of the *kim-tam*. In the *Saar*, drying of paddy, wheat, washing utensils etc. were carried out. At one corner of the *Saar*, toilet was constructed solely with bamboo and sungrass.

Windows were made by cutting the walls, generally on the backside of the house, which was closed with a piece of bamboo matting. In the construction of the house, all points

of intersection were secured by thongs cut from bamboo bark. No use was made at all of nails, screws, or wire. It was observed that the *Mro* hung the heads of wild beasts that all preyed to them from the upper part of the entrance door.

The houses (*Kim*) were constructed raising certain height (6'-8') above the ground level. The *Mro* did that in order to protect them from the attack of snakes and other ferocious wild animals like leopard, the common green viper and leeches. The house was also built slightly slanting to the hills to avoid the easy attack of wind and storm. The open space between the floor of house and the ground was used to store fuel wood (*Chhof*), to shelter the chicken and pigs for protecting them from the rain. Smoking in the glowing fire to increase the durability and resistance against bio-degradation treated the poles of trees used as posts in house.

Alam and Khisa (2000) reveals that the tribal people of CHTs use such species for house posts as *Anogeissus acuminata*, *Bischofia javanica*, *Callicarpa arborea*, *Dillenia pentagyna*, *Holarrhena pubescences*, *Macaranga denticulata*, *Mitragyna parvifolia*, *Nauclea sessilifolia*, *Schima wallichii*, *Vitex peduncularis* which were also found in use by the *Mro* tribe during the study. Bamboo is possibly the most important forest resource for the indigenous people and is greatly used for house construction and agricultural implement by them in CHTs (Siddiqi 1998). There are about seven species of bamboos occur in CHTs (Siddiqi 1998; Sattar 1998; Banik 1990), of which Muli (*Melocanna baccifera*) is used for the construction of floor, wall and roof of house and for various household implements (Sattar 1998). Next to bamboo, sungrass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is the most important material for house construction, which is used for thatching roof of the huts (Siddiqi 1998; Sattar 1998). The tribal people of CHTs use rattans as binding material (Siddiqi 1998) with which the frame-work of roof made from bamboo with cross pieces of wood is fastened securely together (Banik 1998), which was also true for the case of *Mro* tribe and evident from the study.

Food habit of the *Mro* tribe

It was found that, the *Mro* tribe consumed rice as the main staple food; getting three times in a day at morning, noon and night. In addition with rice; meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, molasses etc. were regarded as side dish (Table 1).

Salt and oils were used as condiments in cooking the vegetables and curry to increase its taste and delicacy. Green chilies were very common as a condiment. It was found that the rice, the *Mro* consumed came from the farmers' own *Jhum* field irrespective of farm category. Most of the meat consumed by the rich and the poor were obtained from the market and forest, respectively, as most of the hunters were in the poor community. Thirty percent of poor farmers did not consume meat because whatever they hunted, every thing was sold or bartered either in the mar-

ket or with the neighbors. The case was same for fish also. Ninety percent of rich farmers got fish from the market whereas the remaining 10% from the water bodies in the forests. Most of the poor farmers (70%) followed by medium farmers (60%) collected fish through fishing in the water bodies in and within the forests. Farmers of all categories consumed eggs obtained from their own poultry

except some percentage of medium (30%) and poor (40%) farms. They were more interested to allow hatching of chicken to increase the number in their clutch to facilitate income through further selling them. All the farmers bought salt, oils and molasses from the neighboring market while the wine was made by all in their homes.

Table 1. Food habit of the Mro tribe in Bandarban region, Bangladesh

Items	Average consumption (kg)		Sources (%)									Do not consume (%)		
	Daily	Monthly	Own			Market			Forests			Rich	Medium	Poor
			Rich	Medium	Poor	Rich	Medium	Poor	Rich	Medium	Poor			
Rice	4.5	136	100	100	100	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00
Meat	0.09	2.53	30	30	20	50	30	00	20	20	50	00	20	30
Fish	0.1	2.93	00	00	00	90	20	10	10	60	70	00	20	20
Egg (Doi)	0.15 nos	4.67nos	100	70	60	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	30	40
Salt	0.05	1.5	00	00	00	100	100	100	00	00	00	00	00	00
Oil	0.03	0.85	00	00	00	100	100	100	00	00	00	00	30	00
Molasses	0.02	0.53	00	00	00	100	70	50	00	00	00	00	00	50
Nappi	0.03	1.03	40	80	90	60	20	10	00	00	00	00	00	00
Wine	0.15	4.58	100	100	100	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00

Special and favorite food

There was observed a pickle like fish paste with strong odor, called *Nappi*, a very popular food among the *Mro*. Fish caught from the water bodies were spread out on weeds and mud and left in the sun to dry. As the fish dried, they were pounded time to time until they had formed together with weeds into one pasty mass, which was then formed into large light gray to dark gray balls, depending on the quality of the fishes. The survey revealed that various parts of the plants were used as food by the *Mro* (Table 2). Along with those foods, the *Mro* were also reported to consume some other animals like frogs, rats, mice, snakes, lizards, cockroaches, crickets, grasshoppers, jungle fowl, dogs, dried fish, snails, tortoise, iguana, monkey, deer, wild boar, fox, birds and many other insects.

The use of plant parts as food by the tribals in CHTs is also evident from the other studies. Jalil and Chowdhury (2000) states that the young leaves of *Albizia procera* and *Mangifera sylvatica*; and the young shoots of *Bambusa* spp. and *Daemonorops jenkinsianus* are used as vegetables by the tribes in CHTs, Bangladesh. Maikhuri *et al.* (2000) stated that the *Bhotiya* of India depends to a large extent on wild resources of plant and animal origin for their food security. Samal (1997) revealed that the *Kandha* tribe of Koraput, India, extracts tamarind seeds to eat. Mango stones and tamarind seeds are powdered and then made into gruel with other food items for consumption. Jana and Chauhan (2000a) also agreed in this regard. They state that seeds of *Tamarindus indica* are edible after roasting and eaten by the *Nepalies* tribe of Sikkim. Pod's pulp of the plant *Cassia fistula* is eaten by the local tribals of the same

area.

The "*Lepchas of Dzongu*" of Sikkim are practically omnivorous who even take various poisonous roots of plants, as they know the art of freeing poison (Jana and Chauhan 2000b). Chandra (2002) mentions that 80% of the forest dwellers in Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand and Himachal Pradesh depend on forests for 25%-50% of their annual food requirement. Tribals in Chotanagpur plateau depend on forest food for 4 to 5 months (Surin and Bahadur 1980).

In west-central Bhutan, throughout the year there is always a forest plant in the diet (Namgyel and Ghimiray 1998). Kumar and Goel (2000) consider the flowers and fruits of *Madhuca indica* as the most important minor forest products. In Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and adjoining tracts of Peninsular India, *M. indica* flowers also constitute an important article of food for the tribals (Chandra 2002). The flowers are very good source for the preparation of '*Daru*', a country-liquor that is popularly used in all the tribal areas of Bihar, India (Kumar and Goel 2000).

Banik (1997) stated that the young shoots of several species of bamboo were important vegetable ingredients in the daily meals in China, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand. Approximately 150 species of wild plants consumed in India, Malaysia and Thailand, have been identified as source of emergency foods by the FAO (Anon 1984).

Cooking procedure

The survey discovered that the fireplace was situated on one of the sidewalls of the *Kim-tam*. Cow dung (*Chia-ki*) was considered indispensable for the clay needed to build

the fireplace. It consisted of a mud square (*Teping*) framed with bamboo boards, in the middle of which three conical shaped stones (*Chikua*), were placed which served as a pot

stand. When the rice was cooked, it was found always to be dumped out onto a clean banana leaf (*Dengoi-Rum*), which served as a platter for the entire family.

Table 2. Various parts of plants used as food by the Mro tribe in Bandarban region, Bangladesh

Kinds	Common Name	Scientific Name	Mode of use
Root & Tubers	Yam	<i>Dioscorea sp.</i>	Cooked as vegetables
	Taro	<i>Calocasia esculanta</i>	
	Shoti	<i>Curcuma zeoderia</i>	
Young shoots	Muli bans	<i>Melocanna baccifera</i>	After removing the sheaths, the inner tender portion is thoroughly washed, cut into pieces and then cooked as vegetable. Also sliced and dried to preserve for use in time of food scarcity
	Rattan/Cane	<i>Daemonorops jenkinsianus</i>	The young stem is peeled off and the inner soft and tender portion is cooked as vegetable
Young leaves	Silkoroi	<i>Albizia procera</i>	Cooked as vegetables and used as pickles
	Sajna	<i>Moringa oleifera</i>	
	Wild mango	<i>Mangifera sylvatica</i>	
	Tentul	<i>Tamarindus indica</i>	
Inner stem	Banana	<i>Musa spp.</i>	The white core after peeling off the outside is cut into pieces, the hair like strings from the pieces are removed by finger to make them free from nuisance during eating as a vegetables
Flowers	Chalta	<i>Dillenia indica</i>	Cooked as vegetables
	Hargoja	<i>Dillenia pentagyna</i>	
	Shimul	<i>Bombax ceiba</i>	
	Turmeric	<i>Curcuma longa</i>	
Inflorescence	Banana	<i>Musa spp.</i>	Cooked as vegetable
	Kanthal	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Used as pickle and snack
Fruits	Banana	<i>Musa spp.</i>	Green fruits are cooked as vegetables
	Dumur	<i>Ficus hispida</i>	
	Kanthal	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	
Greens	Thankuni	<i>Centela asiatica</i>	Cooked as vegetable

The farmers reported that the women cooked rice early in the morning. At launch time, they eat the leftover rice, which was cooked in the morning. It was found that the women ate kneeling and the man squatting which reflected a common norm of the *Mro* life. There was a bamboo rack found to be suspended from the roof just half way above the *teping* where the water pots (*Tuyia*) were kept for drying purposes.

Drinking procedure, water sources and storage

All of the *Mro* tribes were observed to collect the water (*Tuyi*) from the surrounding springs or waterfalls (*Ush*). The water was carried in baskets from the *Ush*, which beforehand was poured into gourd bottles. The gourds, which had the form of a thick-bellied bottle, were reported to be grown in the *Jhum* fields for no other purpose. To make the water container with such gourds, generally, the soft insides are allowed to rot out until only the hard shell remains. Water was observed to be drunk directly from the gourd bottles. After each use, the bottles must be allowed to dry out as complete as possible to avoid the water getting foul taste. In order to dry them, these were found to be placed upside

down in a rack over the *Teping*, which facilitated the gourd bottles turning black on the outside in time by the smoke effect. A number of gourd bottles filled with water were reported to be kept in a specific place of the house namely *Tuyi krak*.

Conclusions

The study shows a particular pattern of housing status and food habit of the *Mro* community in Bangladesh. The phenomena observed in the study area correspond to the severe dependence on their surrounding forestlands. The indigenous knowledge on housing may provide some important clues on protection techniques of *Mro* from the wildlives and some other natural disasters. The traditional food habit especially on wildlives, insects and wild plants by the *Mro*, may provide some important and valuable information on the nutritional and medicinal effects on the human body. For a full understanding on the engineering structures of the *Mro* house and on the medicinal values of the food materials up taken by the *Mro*, more engineering, anthropological and chemical researches are needed.

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